

Sermon – “To the Place I Belong”
Sunday, July 15, 2018
Scripture Readings: Isaiah 6:5-8 and Luke 5:1-11
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Our first reading comes from the book of Isaiah, chapter 6, verses 5 through 8. We hear the prophet Isaiah telling of a vision he had, in which he was present in the heavenly temple of God. Listen now for the Word of God to you:

⁵ And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

⁶ Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷ The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” ⁸ Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

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Our second reading comes from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 5, verses 1 through 11. This tells of a moment in which Jesus, having just concluded powerfully speaking the word of God to the people, gives a sign of that power, and all of this together is enough to make Simon Peter overcome with reverence. Hear now the Word of God:

^{5:1} Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, ² he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. ³ He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. ⁴ When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.”

⁵ Simon answered, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.” ⁶ When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. ⁷ So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink.

⁸ But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” ⁹ For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; ¹⁰ and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon.

Then Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” ¹¹ When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

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“Woe is me! I am lost!” This is how the Isaiah passage begins which we heard just a few minutes ago. The prophet in this writing is scared, overcome by the holy otherworldliness of a direct experience of God and, in the face of utter perfection combined with infinite power, a sudden awareness of his own inadequacy— unworthiness, even.

The passage from the Gospel of Luke which we just heard has echoes of the same response. Jesus demonstrates godlike knowledge in directing their nets to the fish, or godlike power in directing the fish to the nets, and Simon Peter is overwhelmed by this, falling on his knees and saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.”

There is a power there that they both have caught a glimpse of, a power way beyond human comprehension, and even just that tiny hint of what glory and power might lie behind the curtain of the universe in the hands of its creator is moving and staggering.

“Woe is me! I am lost!” This is how the Isaiah passage begins which we heard just a few minutes ago.

Its ending though, is this: “Here am I, send me!”

Did you notice that? That is an incredible turnaround in the space of a few short sentences, from a sense of fear and distress to going forth boldly.

What has happened? What can make that possible?

Do you remember how it is described?

“Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: ‘Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.’ Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’”

What brings us from the fearful confusion to the resolute boldness? The same thing which prompted the fearful confusion in the first place: the touch of God. God has brought Isaiah into this strange, weird vision, which has set him askew, made him perplexed and afraid, and it is God who has worked transformation and assurance in him, awakening his sense of direction and purpose. Jesus does the same when he gives Simon Peter his own assurance and purpose.

I have never had a vision the likes of Isaiah’s. Nor have I seen a divine revelation appear in the form of a multitude of fish. But I have been knocked down by the movement of God in my life.

God’s power stirring within us is distressing. It is a call that rouses our real selves, our longings, and draws us, moves us so that we cry out, uncertain, and confused. It hurts to be called to from God, because a call from God breaks through the shell that we have constructed to protect our souls from reality. It tugs at our hearts, and then pulls hard, and then reaches in with a crushing grip until we can ignore it no more, and brings us into something new. God grabs ahold of us, gently sometimes, but at other times with alarming abruptness, and we are shaken, until God says, “What I really want is for you to go from here into a new place, and do a new thing.”

Of course, in most people's lived lives, the movement from comfortable understanding, to baffled discomfort and distress, to a bold, forward drive on a confident foundation does not happen so fast as in these verses. (Nor does it happen only once to us in life.) These passages nevertheless describe our call, too; we just see here the whole thing boiled down to its basics: a regular life, whether a hard life or a contented one, in which we could have journeyed ever along as always—interrupted—by something which beckons to our hearts and our souls—interrupted by the hearing of something that catches us unexpected, something big, something which knocks us down and we, who thought we understood things, are left in a new place of bewilderment, unsure of ourselves, of what surrounds us, of where we are headed.

And this is okay. For we can only get to a deeper place by the ground descending out from under our feet, and it is only by journeying through someplace we've never been that we can arrive at the place we belong.

We've all been in places of discomfort in our lives. The people on our youth mission trip this week have had quite a bit of it in the last few days! We've been confused about the tasks before us, or the expectations given us. We've been physically uncomfortable, tired, hot, and dirty. Some have been uncertain about our social place in a group that we've never been a part of before. Others we've been uneasy about our future lives, knowing we are graduating from this group we have long been a part of and moving on. We've heard things in the music, heard things in our daily work, in the words of scripture, our devotions, heard things in the words to one another we've heard, given, and received, heard things in the deeds of the members of our crews and the members of the families we've served...things that aren't in our everyday lives, and which we don't entirely know what to do with.

This isn't isolated to mission trips—mission trips just provide a much more intense, focused version of this discomfort. All of us present here know what it is like to be knocked askew and thrown into times and places where we are disconcerted, disoriented, maybe even fearful.

These times, places, and moments have something to say to us. God has something to say to us in them. Will we listen when we hear these moments?

Isaiah did not understand what he was seeing or hearing when the question came before him: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" God's working within him moved him to boldness even before he knew where God needed someone to go: "Here am I; send me!" he responded, without fully understanding what God would be sending him to do.

The call remains, issued into the world, and the invitation is to us: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"

Will you?

May the Spirit of the Lord never let us alone until we say yes.

Amen.